



Irena (Nastassia Kinski) peers through the bars of the panther cage at the New Orleans Zoo. Kinski is the center of an erotic triangle which has horrific consequences.

THE MAKING OF PAUL SCHRADER'S

Cat People

It's a sexy, poetic remake of Tourneur's classic.

By Stephen Rebello

On a Universal soundstage, a sensuous, other-worldly Nastassia Kinski peered transfixed through iron bars at a prowling, caged panther in a Victorian-style zoo. The camera pulled slowly away from her and moved through the upper tier of the zoo's administration building, where a scowling John Heard argued heatedly with two zoo officials about how to handle the newly-caged predator.

Still tracking through Ferdinando Scarfiotti's stylized wrought-iron and brick set, the camera nosed past the men as they walked down a circular stairway, then glided sinuously past a row of tightly-packed primates to a lab in which zoo-workers Annette O'Toole and Ed Begley Jr. suspect something disturbing about the new feline's dietary habits.

As choreographed by director Paul Schrader (BLUE COLLAR, HARD CORE, AMERICAN GIGOLO), this elegant and wittily conceived sequence for CAT PEOPLE might have delighted Alfred Hitchcock in its cinematic verve. But coming on the heels of four weeks of New Orleans locations and the mid-June heat and smog of Burbank, the tricky

camera moves only served to rankle the actors and foul up the 40-foot crane. When, after 15 attempts, his single-take set-up finally jelled, Schrader grinned wryly, congratulated all hands and murmured, "Welcome to Kubrick-land."

Come next summer, audiences will have their own opportunity to welcome CAT PEOPLE, one of the more interesting genre projects to surface in some time. The \$15 million film wrapped principal photography in early summer, and is currently in the midst of postproduction. As directed by Schrader, CAT PEOPLE is an attempt to balance horror and poetry in a lyrical fantasy that Universal hopes will set it apart from a wave of horror spoofs and sword & sorcery films also set for release next year.

Alan Ormsby's evocative and erotic screenplay shares little with the seminal Jacques Tourneur film of 1942, other than its title and people-into-cats concept. The new storyline, concocted by Ormsby and Schrader, revolves around a mysterious young woman (Kinski) who comes to New Orleans to live with her magnetic, strangely possessive brother (co-star Malcolm McDowell), from whom she has been separated since child-

hood. The siblings rekindle their combustible relationship, and a Pandora's box of self-realizations opens for both the beautiful young woman and a zookeeper (Heard) fascinated by her.

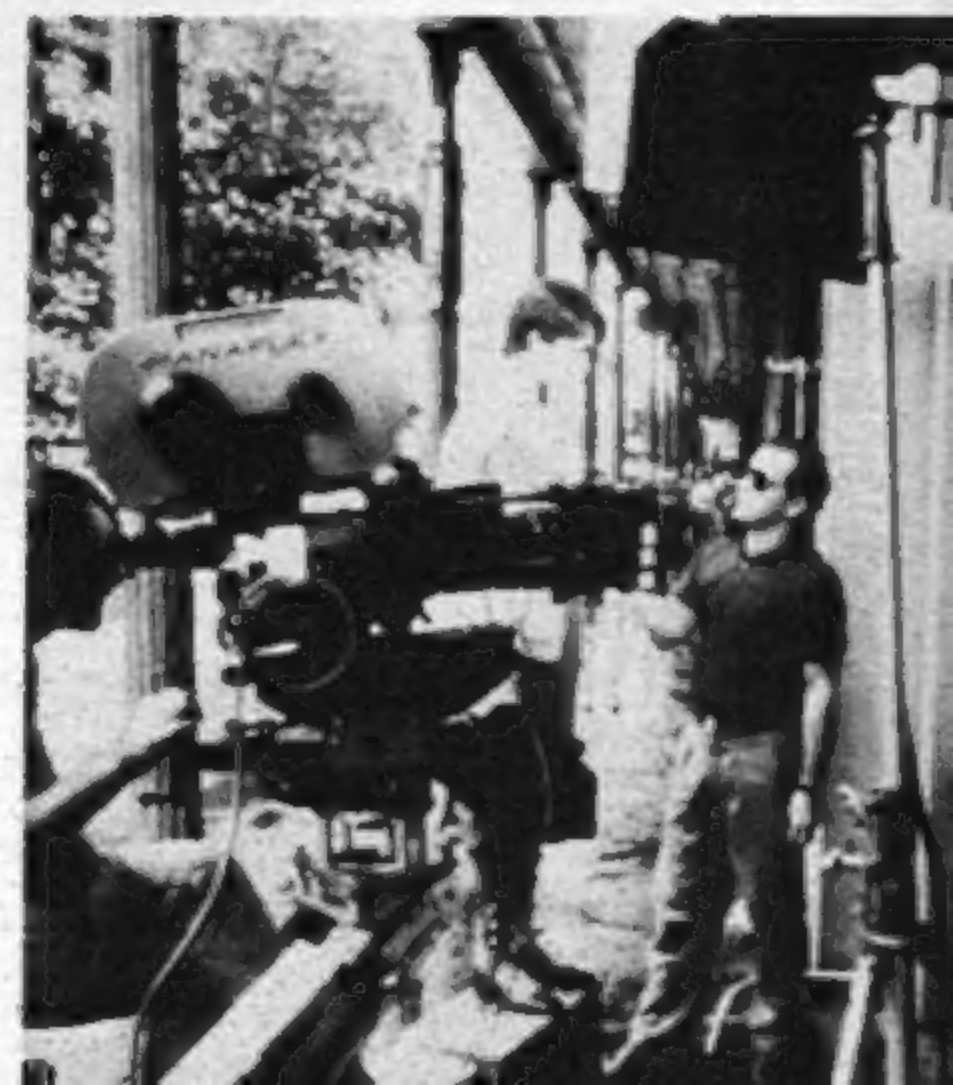
Exploding sexuality (according to crew members, the film could easily earn an X-rating), a touch of incest, ancient myths and rites, nightmares and a dismembered limb or two promise to make this CAT PEOPLE far more than a simple remake of Tourneur's much-admired gem.

"I've always liked Val Lewton's pictures, but when you break CAT PEOPLE down—though it has wonderful qualities—it just falls apart," said Ormsby, who also wrote MY BODYGUARD and several low-budget horror films, including DEATHDREAM (aka DEAD OF NIGHT). "I felt the film needed a whole new concept. You'd barely have enough for a TV movie otherwise. What finally worked for me was thinking of it as 'Beauty and the Beast.' It's a woman who turns into a beast when a man makes love to her, rather than the other way around.

"I always thought it should be horrifying, but I saw it as a touching, morbid love story," Ormsby said. "I

wrote a lead character who is a recluse—a macho, misanthropic guy who doesn't really like the modern world, a guy who's a lot more comfortable with the animals he tends in the zoo. Underneath, he's a man who loves poetry, a kind of morbid romantic, and this strange girl brings *all* of that out in him. To him, this girl's

Nastassia Kinski and director Paul Schrader (right) rehearse a shot in New Orleans' historic Jackson Square. Cinematographer David Bailey (at camera) prepares the location set-up.





Malcolm McDowell leers over Kinski, but that's probably not brotherly love in his eyes.

animalism is part of his fascination, his obsession."

Cinematographer John Bailey, who worked with Schrader previously on *AMERICAN GIGOLO*, has shot *CAT PEOPLE* in a rich, uncluttered style that utilizes slightly surreal color effects—one could almost dub it "horror chic." The continuous tracking camera movements that hem in the characters underscore the "no way out" feel typical of Schrader's style.

"Even for a horror film," one crew member said, "this picture has a very nasty, downbeat feeling to it. I don't know how audiences are going to take to it, but the visuals are going to knock people out."

Schrader's film all share a hard edge to them; a grim, unpleasant outlook towards society. But it is expected that *CAT PEOPLE* will show audiences a different side of the director. "Paul and I decided early on that we didn't want this to be a *bloody* horror film," said Bailey. "Its principal sensibility is really more like the style of Cocteau or Franju. We screened a lot of Franju because he deals with that whole area of poetic horror. Though we looked at a lot of horror films, we found that most didn't have anything for us. We were making a completely different kind of film."

"If anything, *CAT PEOPLE*'s sensibility is one of innocence," Bailey added. "Visually, it's sophisticated, but the characters—especially John's and Nastassia's—are almost child-like. If the picture works the way we hope it will, we're going to take the audience in a direction perhaps they never could have expected."

Although the company spent a month on location and a considerable amount of the film's action is set at various New Orleans locales—including the zoo and the city's seamier

side—visual consultant Ferdinando Scarfiotti filled six Hollywood sound stages with highly-stylized sets after an initial scouting trip to New Orleans proved disappointing.

"This whole film is about cages, imprisonment and unattainable objects," said Scarfiotti, who also handled design chores on *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* and *THE CONFORMIST*, as well as six months with director Nicholas Roeg on Universal's *FLASH GORDON*, before Dino DeLaurentiis cleaned house. "I've tried to convey a surreal, off-balance quality to the designs. We're not as concerned with objective reality at all, because this is a romantic, frightening fantasy."

As was the case with most of the cast and crew on *CAT PEOPLE*, Scarfiotti professed his admiration, but not emulation, of the original film. "There is very little in common with the two films," he explained. "We went back to the Tourneur film many times, though. I really loved his use of light and shadows. What they were able to achieve, especially for so little money, is really remarkable. Though I would have loved to have been forced to meet the challenge of doing this picture in black and white, too, I really wouldn't have done very much differently."

Scarfiotti waved his hand at his Victorian zoo set—which features huge, glowering cat sculptures looming atop the claustrophobic cages—and added, "This set would look great in black and white, for instance. It really *is* black and white, except for the brick. We're trying for some truly beautiful color on this film, though, and I hope we can touch—in a different way—something of what Tourneur was able to accomplish in the swimming pool sequence."

Studio execs are reportedly "ec-



During a routine autopsy of a dead panther, zookeeper John Heard discovers the shocking secret of *CAT PEOPLE*—it's what's inside that counts.

static" about the visuals they have viewed to date.

And what of the title characters, the cats themselves? Animal handler Ron Oxley is using three live black panthers for the stalking and attack sequences, and brothers Tom and Ellis Burman built a life-sized mechanical panther, which can rise from prone position to full height while moving its head, nose, mouth and flaring its nostrils.

This mechanical wonder joins the other Burman-made pieces for the film: assorted human appendages and various articulated cat heads and slashing paws and tails, to be married with live cat footage. The Burman Studio comes to *CAT PEOPLE* with probably as much experience with animal makeups as anyone else in Hollywood, being responsible for, among other effects, the half-man/half-dog in Phil Kaufman's *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* and the seven-eyed, seven-horned goat in *ALTERED STATES*.

"In all our cat-transformations, we're not going after grotesqueness,

but beauty," explained Tom Burman. "Since we have Nastassia and Malcolm, both attractive people, we're melding their features with those of magnificent, sleek cats. I deal with so many graphic pictures that I'd love to see *CAT PEOPLE* work without sensationalism. I'd love to see them let the audience create its own horror. Give them just enough to tease them."

Robbie Blalack and his effects firm, Praxis, will handle the film's blue-screen work. Praxis may also provide one or two special sequences for Kinski's subjective, post-transformation cat vision, which promises to outperform their similar effects for *WOLFEN*. In addition, Giorgio Moroder has been signed to score the film.

While it is still far too early to know how this new *CAT PEOPLE* will look when editor Bud Smith and Schrader deliver a final cut, one thing appears clear: *CAT PEOPLE* is being lavished with an attention to style and detail all too rare in the realm of films of the fantastic. □